

Stallers of Proliferation: Why is South Korea not Nuclear?

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The beginning of 2016 has seen several major blows to the threat perceptions of South Korea. On the 6th January, its isolated and precarious neighbour, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) conducted an underground nuclear test. Shortly following this on the 7th February, the DPRK successfully launched a satellite into orbit, testing prohibited dual-use missile launch technologies. While scepticism of exact capabilities persists, the steps between current technologies and a deliverable nuclear tipped missile appear to be reducing. Nevertheless, despite a total of four nuclear tests, numerous missile launches and suggestions of a fifth nuclear test possible^[1], South Korea are not currently countering with their own nuclear weapons programme despite calls from senior politicians^[2].

In February, Won Yoo-cheol, floor leader of the Saenuri Party reported that South Korea “*cannot borrow an umbrella from a neighbour every time it rains*”, and called for Seoul to have its “*own raincoat*”,^[3] demonstrating a belief that the extended deterrence provided by the United States (US) is no longer enough to protect Seoul. Such sentiment was reiterated by Noh Cheol-lae, a high ranked member of the same party, who argued that the deployment of the US missile defence Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system would not be enough to guarantee South Korea security, and that Seoul must pursue the development of nuclear weapons.^[4] So the question remains, with many key drivers of nuclear proliferation present - a nuclear adversary, domestic political interest and a nuclear infrastructure - why is South Korea not going nuclear?

The first explanation as to why South Korea is not embarking on nuclear weaponisation is geographical. Korea finds itself in a region which has established itself in a globalised world through economic might. East Asian power and Chinese regional hegemony is associated with economic clout. This perception of power has trickled down through the growing economies, resulting in an understanding that international standing grows

with trade and the economy. China, as the regional hegemon and a nuclear weapons state, has set a clear path to follow for increased power. Although China first conducted a nuclear test in 1964 and reached a thermonuclear capability just three years later in 1967, it was not this capability that led it to its positioning today. Looking to Europe for comparison, the UK sought nuclear weapons to reposition itself with the US and prove that it was capable of going it alone, developing nuclear weapons to maintain prestige. However prestige in South Korea is not associated first and foremost with weapons and military might, but through trade and finance flows. China, once established in its economic strength, has since pursued an increased military to work its way further into the international area. Chinese influence in the world is not a result of a threat of weapons use, but a financial leverage. This is also reflected in the Chinese resolute nuclear posture of no first use. Such nuclear doctrine means that these weapons have not become an official tool of political power and gain.

Regionally Japan is also positioned high up the ranks following its economic sway, and has established itself there without a nuclear weapon. When looking to the West and America especially, power assertions came from military pursuits and strength. However South Korea, having witnessed the Chinese development, understands that to increase its international standing and prestige, it must strengthen its economy and make its mark that way. The pursuit of nuclear weapons does not necessarily fit into this East Asian model of power, prestige and growth.

The second staller to the proliferation drive comes from the civil nuclear infrastructure. The South Korea nuclear infrastructure is currently providing the country with great benefits and they are leading in civil nuclear cooperation and in safety and security. The threat of having this placed under sanctions should they decide to 'go nuclear' is enough to stop them doing so. South Korea are using their nuclear assets, in the region and beyond, to set themselves on a trajectory of higher prestige. Over the past 6 months, South Korea has signed nuclear Memorandums of Understanding (MOU's) with the Czech Republic and Argentina for example, and has continued development of nuclear reactors in United Arab Emirates. This nuclear business would certainly be lost to the

helm of sanctions should a weapons capability be pursued. South Korea not only want, but need to be seen as a leading responsible nuclear player, adhering to non-proliferation norms and sharing their security and safety knowledge and technology.

Through nuclear engagement and peaceful nuclear development, South Korea has more to gain, not just through economic development, but an increasing role in international forums and supporting energy policy and targets. South Korea is committed to decreasing carbon emissions and reliance on coal energy sources. With goals to reduce business-as-usual emissions levels by 37% by 2030[5], nuclear power is taking the forefront in energy generation. This means the South has much more to gain by avoiding the weapons path than they do by trying to match their neighbour's weapons development. Pursuing nuclear weapons would take away their nuclear export and knowledge sharing opportunities that allow for significant growth within region and more globally. Furthermore, if Korea does want to continue the development of their nuclear capabilities, to strengthen their indigenous civil technology through reprocessing and enrichment, South Korea needs to remain on the non-proliferation path. Proving nuclear responsibility is key to the future of their nuclear energy infrastructure.

Although the above mentioned stallers of proliferation address the drivers of power and prestige, the security gap still remains however the nuclear umbrella provided by the US is significant in addressing this concern. Irrespective of whether US soil would be traded for Seoul in reality, the theoretical recognition of US nuclear cover is enough to quash, or at least strongly counter, calls for an independent nuclear capability. The US have comforted the South with a growing military blanket in the first quarter of this year, which appears to be enough to legitimise the nuclear umbrella and sweep the practical concerns of this policy under the carpet. Additional ballistic missile capabilities were provided by the US, as well as MQ-1C Gray Eagle unmanned aerial systems,[6] feeding the credibility of an extended deterrence policy. Talks of deploying THAAD on the Korean peninsula also go some way to filling the weapons gap and although THADD cannot act as a comparator to a deployable nuclear weapons capability, missile defence

systems can reduce the value of nuclear weapons by decreasing their likelihood of reaching their target.

Whilst in reality there is likely to be many practical short comings to a reliance on US military assets in the face of a DPRK nuclear threat, the military support has thus far been enough to bolster the South Korean sense of security. If the US increases its military umbrella following a nuclear test, reassurance is provided that in the wake of something more sinister the US response would be scaled up to match this. Furthermore, while US tactical nuclear weapons were removed from the Korean peninsula in 1991, the distant option of re-stationing provides reassurance, although this possibility is currently off the table. Although there are many weaknesses of relying on another sovereign state as a provider of security, for now the US umbrella is providing South Korea with the comfort it needs to be able to justify avoiding its own nuclear weapons pursuit. Thus there are still many more rungs left of the ladder of escalation before Korea nuclear weapons development is the only realistic option.

Seoul has much more to lose than gain from the development of an indigenous nuclear weapons capability. South Korea have experienced many of the driving causes that have pushed other states to pursue nuclear weapons. However, because of visions of power within the region, the benefits of civil nuclear development and trade, and a US military comfort blanket, South Korea are not likely to engage in the development of nuclear weapons soon, even in the face of a belligerent nuclear neighbour.

[1] 'Is North Korea Preparing for a Fifth Nuclear Test?', *38 North*, 16th Feb 2016, <http://38north.org/2016/02/punggye021616/>

[2] 'Time for a nuclear South Korea?', *The Register-Guard*, 21st Feb 2016, <http://registerguard.com/rg/opinion/34069309-78/time-for-a-nuclear-s.-korea.csp>

[3] 'Ruling party's floor leader calls for nuclear armament', *Yonhap News*, 15th Feb 2016, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2016/02/15/0301000000AEN20160215002551315.html>

- [4] 'Time for a nuclear South Korea?', *The Register-Guard*, 21st Feb 2016, <http://registerguard.com/rg/opinion/34069309-78/time-for-a-nuclear-s.-korea.csp>
- [5] 'South Korea to Cut Gas Emissions by 37% from BAU Levels by 2030', *Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy*, 1st July 2015, <http://english.motie.go.kr/?p=5799>
- [6] 'Attack drone to deploy in South Korea', *The Korea Times*, 27th Jan 2016, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/01/205_196489.html